

# Classical Greek art – a matter of content as well as style?

Robin Osborne

In the first half of the fifth century B.C., Greek sculpture changed radically. No longer was it stiff, schematic, and frontal, but imbued with life-like qualities. Robin Osborne looks again at this shift and at how we make sense of it.

If scantily clad women have been the pin-ups favoured by tabloid newspapers, naked men have been the pin-ups favoured by historians of Greek art. Faced with explaining how exactly 'classical' sculpture of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. is different from the 'archaic' sculpture of the preceding two centuries, art historians set a sixth-century statue (or *kouros*), representing a naked beardless young man standing still with hands firmly by his sides, his left foot forward, and his gaze straight ahead (below), next to the so-called 'Kritios boy' (right), a figure found on the Athenian acropolis and dated shortly before or shortly after the Persian Wars. The Kritios boy, they argue, shows a 'revolution' to have taken place: his hips and buttocks are no longer level for he has been caught on the move, and his head no longer stares straight ahead, but is turned to one side.

The differences between the *kouros* and the Kritios boy seem at first slight, but are profound. Whereas the *kouros* shows off the parts of the body in such a way that they can be identified and numbered (just count the 'six-pack' of abdominal muscles), the Kritios boy shows body parts in organic relationship to each other, offering a body that seems perfectly adapted to stand in that posture. The *kouros*, whose beardlessness suggests ideal youth, is replaced by a figure on whom the observer wants to pin an age (perhaps 14?), not just because of the immature genitals, but because of the soft flesh and tight buttocks. Most important, the *kouros* who relates only to the viewer standing in front of him, offering, in his body, no indications of role or identity, but offering himself as a symbol, is replaced by the Kritios boy whose movement and turned head suggest his relationship to a wider world – suggest that he has his own story.

## Statues in context

What is at stake in this change, or 'Greek revolution', as art historians have called it? Sculptors have replaced symbols of manhood with figures who insist on everyone's individuality, but to what end? Primarily, it has been suggested, to create admiration and wonder in the viewer. The ability of the artist to recapture individuality leaves the spectator open-mouthed, much as a fine performance by an actor in drama or film might leave an audience open-mouthed.

Just as actors who capture the way an individual moves and speaks do so by showing that individual engaged with a wider world, however, so sculptors who can evoke a sense of individuality in the figures they create do so by situating those figures in a context. Naked male pin-ups wrench sculpture from its context and reduce it to a matter of artistic skill quite as much as female pin-ups reduce women to sex-objects. If we are to understand the Greek revolution properly we need to see how the individual figures which artists evoke were made to relate to other figures.

When we study free-standing sculpture we are almost always studying works whose original context we know either not at all or only in the most general terms. We know nothing of the context of the *kouros* discussed above, and of the Kritios boy only that it was displayed somewhere on the Athenian acropolis. If we want to understand figures in context we need to look at either architectural or relief sculpture or else at painted pottery. Looking at painted pottery has the great advantage that (unlike freestanding statuary so much of which was melted down) enough survives that we can assess whether the sort of scene we are looking at was typical or unusual. Since I want to assess what happens generally or for the most part, I will concentrate here on typical scenes on pots.

## A pot-ted history

A cup in the British Museum (below, right, and opposite, British Museum, inv. no. 1850,0302.2. Images © The Trustees of the British Museum) that can be ascribed to a painter known as the Foundry Painter and dated to the two decades before the Persian wars, shows a number of male figures, most of them naked, in the gymnasium or *palaistra* (wrestling court). On the interior is a young boy, who is tying up his hands with thongs preparatory to boxing, accompanied by a bearded 'trainer' figure with a forked stick, whose attention has been distracted by something out of view. On one side of the exterior two young men, their hands clearly bound with thongs, are boxing, and two further young men are engaged in all-in wrestling (the *pankration*). One has the other's head in an arm-lock, and both attempt to put their fingers into the other's eyes, a forbidden practice. The trainer seems about to bring down his forked stick upon them to end this foul play. On the other side we see a hoplite runner, kitted out with greaves and shield and with his helmet in his hand, a trainer, two boxers, fighting with fingers splayed although their hands are bound with thongs, and a further boxer waiting to fight.

All is action here. The artist is interested in what happens in the gymnasium, and in showing what wrestling and boxing are like in practice. There is a strong sense of competition, and of the practice that is required for competitive success. There is some interest in the appropriate activities for men with different physiques – the hoplite runner is a rather leaner figure than the slightly paunchy boxers – but in general, although the abdominal muscles are carefully indicated, there is little about the detailed musculature that conveys the bodily experience of these various activities. Gesture says everything in these images – the sharply turned heads and the demonstrative arms.

An amphora in the British Museum from shortly after the middle of the fifth century (right and overleaf, British Museum, inv. no. 1864,1007.8. Images © The Trustees of the British Museum) also has a gymnasium scene. On one side are two naked young men, one holding out an

object in the palm of one hand, perhaps a piece of fruit, and holding a strigil behind his back, the other with strigil (or body-scraper) in one hand and sponge-bag in the other. On the other side (overleaf) a young man in a cloak or *himation* holds out a strigil. The easy stance of the youth holding out a fruit, and the way in which his companion has his weight on one leg and the other trailing, mark these figures' classical style. But what is most notable is that the artist's interest is no longer in action. The interactions are not achieved by punches, wrestling holds, or potential assault with forked sticks. The interactions are achieved by exchange of glances. The painter is not showing a definitive narrative of bad practice in the wrestling ring, or whatever, but showing an indefinite narrative, an everyday scene into which viewers are invited to think themselves. The focus is on what the youths are thinking, how their relationship is developing.

This revolution, from action to interaction, from competition to collaboration, is repeated across painted pottery. Take soldiers. Around 500 B.C. they are involved in all sorts of actions, fighting as heavily-armed hoplites, light-armed archers, light infantry with crescent-shaped shields ('peltasts'), or cavalry. When they are shown putting on armour they put on all sorts of armour. A wine-mixing bowl attributed to the Cleophrades Painter, for instance (right, © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 08.258.58. Images ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)), Rogers Fund, 1908), shows two heavily armed warriors, both already wearing greaves and breastplates, one of whom is inspecting his helmet and feeling his hair, prior to putting the helmet on, and the other, wearing his helmet, is holding out a sword in a scabbard, apparently for the other warrior to take and sling round his neck. One warrior's shield is behind him, the other at his feet. The focus here is on the act of arming: we almost feel that we are in the middle of a formulaic Homeric arming scene, in which the different elements of hoplite armour are put on in fixed order.

A deep cup of the shape known as a skyphos (opposite, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 0 6.1079. Image ([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)), Rogers Fund, 1906) painted a generation later, after the Persian Wars, shows on both sides a superficially similar scene. On one side a bearded man in a felt hat and cloak holds out a sword to a cloaked youth who is moving away from him, trailing his helmet behind him. On the other a bearded man with a spear looks down at a helmet proffered to him by a youth. On this side both figures are effectively naked, their cloaks draped ineffectually over a shoulder. The interest is not in the act of arming but in the interactions between the figures.

Indeed it isn't an arming scene, but a scene of an older and a younger man interacting over helmet and sword. The painter, named by scholars 'the Penthesileia Painter', not only conveys a sense of more relaxed postures and more conversational gestures, but encourages the viewer to enter the minds of the figures and to think themselves into their relationship.

### A new way of seeing

Looking at these pots helps us better understand the revolution that can be perceived in sculptures of the naked male body. The way in which artists in the fifth century chose to capture what made one male body distinct from another did not merely attract wonder from spectators. Nor did the way in which these fifth-century figures, unlike sixth-century *kouroi*, evoked a life of their own, rather than reflecting back the life of the viewer, serve simply to alert the viewer to the possibility of narrative. What these sensitive and sensuous bodies offered was figures who contemplated before they acted, figures whose life was a life of the mind, not merely a string of actions. The revolution introduced and advertised a whole set of different values and encouraged in the viewers a new valuation of the world.

Art history has often told the story of the 'Greek revolution' as a story of the gradual improvement of artistic skill, as if archaic sculptors really wanted to produce figures like those of the fifth century but were unable to do so, and as if every new sculpture corrected the errors of the last. What the pots make clear is that fifth-century artists do not represent the world that sixth-century artists sought to represent, but represent it better. They represent a different world – or at least they represent a world in which quite different aspects of life are valued. We should hardly be surprised at this; after all, for all the shared stories, fifth-century tragedy represents a world in which quite different aspects of life are valued from those valued in Homeric epic.

Think about the 'Greek revolution' only in terms of the sculpted male body and we think that the revolution is a matter of artistic style. But pots show that style and content are inseparable in art – there is no way of looking which is not also a way of seeing. During the first half of the fifth century artists all over Greece came to realize other ways to look, and other things to see, than their sixth-century predecessors. As they did so they showed a new world to their contemporaries, a world in which what was put on stage and what was decided in political meetings could not remain the same. It is vain to try to identify who led this revolution and who followed – but the role of humble

painted pottery may well have been as important in disseminating a new world view as that of the more famous products of the tragedians.

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